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ABSTRACT

This paper considers the inclusion of different types of dialect variants in formal language behavior. College-level writing is examined from the points of view of the writer and the teacher, and the determinants and features of vernacular transference are discussed with reference to literary, social, and economic realities. Specific techniques for dealing with dialect are drawn from classes in English composition and the use of English in the Caribbean over the past twenty years. (Author/CFM)

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On Smoking in the Shower: Or Vernaculars in College English[1]

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On Smoking in the Shower: or Vernaculars in College English

All human languages have certain features in common: sound, syntactic, and semantic systems that operate in a logical manner are shared by all speakers of a language. These systems, and the features that compose them, are learnt by native speakers in infancy and early childhood. The knowledge thus acquired allows speakers not only to produce an infinite variety and number of permutations of the structural features inherent in a language, but also to generalize from them, with increasing age and experience. Thus it is that within the native language and in foreign languages that may be learnt at different stages of life, the hypotheses concerning the organization and use of one language are applied, with various degrees of conscious effort.

"College English" seems to be a defining characteristic of American colleges and universities: it supports a lot of people, and like apple-pie and motherhood, will probably continue to be <u>à la mode</u> for some time to come. It is instructive, nonetheless, to observe that there are college and university systems in the English-speaking world which do not allocate huge portions of their budgets to teach people what they already know or to unteach habits which have been formed in infancy. Our concern here today suggests that we might better pay attention to the type of success (with a habit usually formed in adolescence or adulthood) met by Surgeon-General's warnings, no-smoking signs, and non-smokers' pleas in pursuing the ideals generated by most teachers of Freshman Composition!

The learning of anything presupposes a measure of interest and some aptitude on the part of the learner, and the learning of language is subject to these factors, too. When a teacher or a program are present in a learning situation, these too will mediate the success of the attempt at learning. In addition, learning usually occurs in a social situation, so that the nature of the support or obstruction provided by the society will also mediate the success of the learning process for members of the society — be it in language or in other norms of the societal definition.

Each native speaker of a language may be identified by his or her particular way of using that language--a fact which is realized in the phonological, syntactic, and semantic selections which each speaker makes from the system of the language: this individual language behaviour is called

idiolectal language behaviour. Given the fact that language behaviour is usually in interactions between more than one person, there have to be a sufficient number of shared features in separate idiolects so that intercommunication may take place. When a set of idiolects may be seen to share a number of phonological, syntactic, and semantic features, this set of idiolects is called a dialect: A dialect may be defined with reference to a specific lexicon--when speakers of that dialect use words which differ markedly from words used by a set of different speakers of the same language. Similarly, a dialect may be defined with reference to phonology or syntax, or to all of these components.

There are no languages which have not been spoken at some point in time; there are, however, hundreds of languages which have never been written: these facts suggest that the uttered form of language is the primary form. Additionally, the changes in language which come to be recorded in writing are those changes which survive through time in the oral media of language, are thereby found acceptable to a wide variety of speakers, and THEN enter the written media. The vernacular is, therefore, vital to the continued existence of the written media.

H.C. Wyld pointed out several decades ago that:

> "...at a given period the language is everywhere one and the same--within the limits of the same dialect. Written and uttered language, passing through the various gradations from the most familiar and colloquial to the most elevated and carefully finished, are all of a piece; they all represent merely different ways of using the same instrument." (1956: 157)

Furthermore, only human beings are capable of using language in this dynamic and variable fashion, so that language, with its inherent variation, is defined as a species-specific characteristic of human beings--and idiolects in their written and uttered forms as defining characteristics of each person's humanity. To attack or deny the viability of any idiolect, then, is to attack or deny the humanity of its progenitor.

Students in American and non-American colleges are alike in that they are aware that gradations exist in informal and formal language behaviour, and aware that these can be realized orally and in writing. Unlike many of their teachers, they realize that the formal language behaviour of a personal

letter does not have to be the formal language appropriate to a legal opinion or to telegrams, liturgy, story-telling or travel directions. In non-American college-English classes, students analyse and comment upon the effectiveness of various authors' representations of the various gradations in language: they do this orally and in writing. Unlike their American counterparts, these students do not have to conform in any way to the examples under analysis. Their writing assignments acknowledge the nature of human language, and do not seek to stifle or retard into mimicry the idiolects of the students. In the manner of Langston Hughes, these assignments ask the student to:

> "Go home and write
> a page tonight
> And let that page come out of you
> Then it will be true."

But, as Hughes goes on to say--Is it that simple? It isn't simple for the page to come out of students who rarely associate with the printed page; but it is less so when the page to be written is not allowed to come out of the students. Teachers who think that college students are functionally illiterate tend to approach "minority students" with the attitude that they are illiterate in two or more languages, and therefore need more and more semesters of the whitewashing shower that is College English mimicry. Fred Hargadon, the Dean of Admissions at Stanford keeps pointing out that his rich, upper class, establishment students have problems in writing, and like the Newsweek staffs, suggests that more reading on Johnny's part will resolve the problem of "why Johnny Can't Write". Let us look at some examples of what Johnny (or Joan) might read:

> "...she always stimulated discussions of America's past and it's people."
> (Senator Edward Kennedy)

> "But a great many women absolutely refuse to see a women doctor, regardless of how superb her qualifications may be."
> (Dr. Theodore Isaac Rubin)

> "...while this was doing, George and Billy sawed 30 Foot..."
> (George Washington)

"...on the morning of the Depression, the boss had said, 'Sorry baby, but we can't build today. No inches.' 'Wha' d'ya mean no inches? We got wood. We got metal. We even got tape measures. 'Yeah, but you don't understand business. We been using too many inches and there's just no more to go around.'"
(Alan Watts)

"Old Molly Means was a hag and a witch
Chile of the devil, the dark, and sitch
Her heavy hair hung thick in ropes
And her blazing eyes was black as pitch"
(Margaret Walker)

It may be argued that these are not examples of "Good English"; they are present, nonetheless, in contemporary literature, and if we ask students to read, we must expect that they will meet examples such as these. When people with economic success and societal prestige are the authors or utterers of these examples, we may also expect that some of the writing of all students will provide similar examples--whether they belong to, or aspire to, prestige groups. Some teachers feel that the proliferation of "readers" which form the basis of their college-English classes should represent earlier stages of the language and not its current form: in discussing the merits of this notion, it is interesting to compare George Washington's 19th century example (example 3, above) with what our version might be one century later, and Samuel Pepys' statement in 1665--two centuries earlier:

"...a dead corps of the plague just bringing down a little pair of stairs"

which represents syntactic constructions still alive in Washington's English. Similar comparative analysis will show that the rate of language change today--like that of other of our cultural forms--is progressing at an accelerated pace. We are different from earlier writers, too, in that we are taking less time to record in writing the accelerated changes in the oral forms of our language. Teachers who know the structure of the English language, through even a nodding acquaintance with its history and development, will be able to explain to students about the "push-pull" or "see-saw" trends in a language constantly changing, and to understand that a current tendency to alter the periphrastic passive construction is an example of precisely the same trends which first generated it.

Kiparsky and other historical/comparative linguists have shown that each succeeding generation mutates in some way those norms shared by the preceding generation of speakers of a language. My own research has shown that different children in the same family, exposed to the same socializational processes, may mutate their parents' language behaviour in different ways. We should then expect that the idiolects of today's college students will differ among themselves and also from those of their parents and teachers. The writing of today's college students, then, may perhaps be best conceptualized as the mutated dialectal characteristics of a younger generation. Let us look at some examples of this writing which emerged from my classes for the "disadvantaged."

"This is one subject that I would say is needed outside of the classroom. Learning how to use the lanugage and using it to ones advantage when looking for a job. Dependening on the job one is after, it could make a difference if one know's the elaborate lanugage or the restricted.
(Maese)

"My reaction the writeing of "The Black Elk" was that it was about a tribe and a secred dance that they were haveing for there tribe."
(Melon)

"Come to big, beautiful, dynamic Detroit. See the fantastic waterfront stabbings, riots in Cadillac Square, burning of the Old Mission Buildings in the colorful downtown area. Witness strangely dressed rock-concert weirdos tear down the front of Colso Hall trying to see their favorites. "Yes, we have all this plus the highest murder-rate in the world today. ...So don't just sit on your can; now is the time to move it."
(McArdle)

"The air is cool, you can feel it when you breathe. Now don't go thinking that it's cold because it's not, just frosh. You look up and see the dark-blue sky with only a hint of small, silky, white clouds scattered through the vastness."
(Preciado)

"...is wearing a red shirt with blue checkered pants with black and white tennies shoes..."
(Milo)

"...the black man fights, the redman fights, the chicano and oriental fight against the Anglos..."
(Frost)

"The fact that my mother has been on welfare for many years makes me want to get out in the world and find me a pot of gold. This pot of gold I am in search of is starting right here in this University. My education is the road which will someday lead me straight to it."
(Trujillo)

"I participated in these demonstrations hoping that it would have some effect on the President and Congress, but to my dismay, the only effect it had was a couple of speeches made by some politicians working for some publicity, and the news reporting it as everyone was just down there to get high, drunk, and tear down the nation's capital." (Allner)

"Poor people walk the streets, while inside the trading companies, the pawn shops, the liquor stores, the motels and Gallup City Hall are the rich people. ( ) This is the city which bills itself... "The Indian Capital of the World."

(Benally)

"The future woman is going to look quite different than the woman of today, but will act quite similarly...with her ears she will be able to hear her neighbors' conversations three miles away..."
(Banie)

All of these examples can bear some polishing and technical adjustment, so that the meaning can be clearly communicated. Notice, however, that we understand all of the examples. The dialectal features which characterize these young users of language as "students" and the earlier examples as from a preceding generation, also characterize us all as members of a larger encompassing group, as well. Compare your responses to the above fifteen examples with your response to this one which is the title of a paper in a teachers' journal:

"Education and the Politics of Jabberwocky:
A Cursory View of Methodological Means for
Maximizing the Somnambulistic and/or Reactional
Behavioral Reaction of Potential Recipients in
the Process of Prolific Communication Education--
Wize"

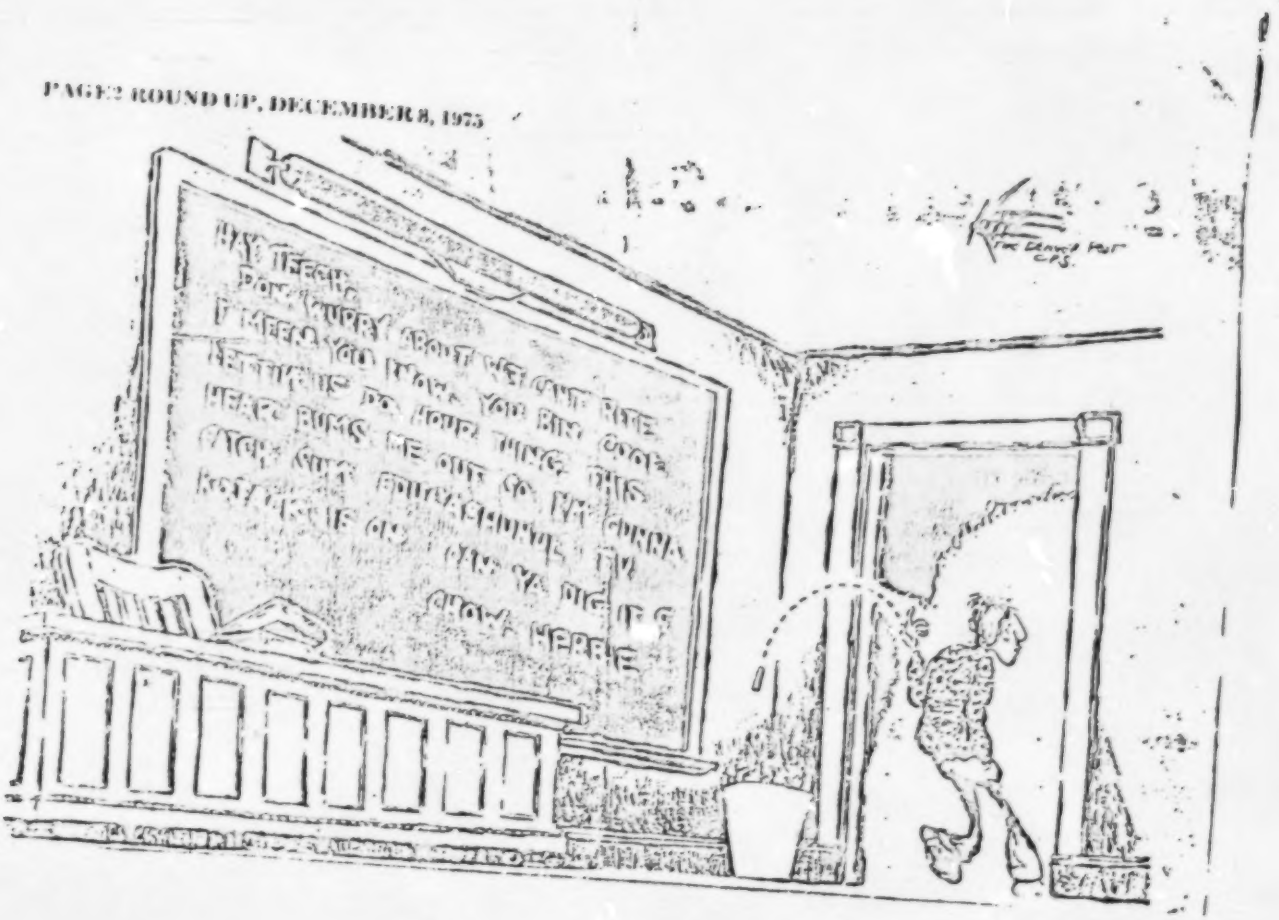
As Chomsky has shown, the nature of the intonational contour defines the grammaticality of a sentence. The noun-phrase I just read seems ungrammatical to me. It is an example of what James Sledd calls "New High Bureaucratian", and it is not spoken by many, though it is written by some. It is perhaps this type of English which we ought to worry about, since it is usually used to deceive, besides.

One of my older students recently wrote: "I can understand how the (correction of) wording, punctuation, and sentence structure affect my own work better than by using someone else's." The writing that students have to do outside of College-English classes is going to be writing that will have to "come out of" the students, and it is going to change constantly through time, and according to context and situation. It is this writing that needs to be developed, so that the particular voice of the student can best be heared.

My methodology is extremely simple (there are no gimmicks like grading on cassette tapes) it is extremely thorough and it is completely individualized, since the 'problems' in any one student's writing are going to be different from that in any other's. One of my freshmen who is a bad speller has just completed a study of his classmates' spelling--and found it to be very variable, and usually 'way out': he will use his dictionary from now on in a way that he never has. The only textbook which college students in the Caribbean, and in my classes, require is a good dictionary--a dictionary that has a comprehensive listing of the lexicon of English and that also provides a variety of meanings. 'Readings' come from all over, since I have not met a 'reader' which is nearly equivalent to Anderson's <u>The Written Word</u>. This is used in Caribbean and British high schools--where writing is developed (the mechanics having been taught in elementary schools) by critical idiolectal written analysis of the collocations and features inherent in English in advertisements, Newspapers, Disguises (such as statistical data), Argument, Description, Conversation and Opinion.

New standards of language are constantly emerging, and college-English students--like all other users of English, observe the changes and mutations which generate these standards in

the oral and written forms of their idiolects. Teachers who ignore or fight these facts will find that their students will devise, like our cartoon characters, ways to stay high and dry.



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